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# Responding to the challenges of collaboration:

## developing an innovative research partnership between local government and global university

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### Abstract

In Sydney's inner north the co-location of a research intensive university, a nationally significant research and business centre and a sector-leading curriculum innovation has opened opportunities to shape an exciting collaborative relationship between Macquarie University and the City of Ryde. In establishing a collaborative agreement for the period 2012-2032, the partners are pursuing a vision that integrates City of Ryde's innovative approaches to key local government roles with Macquarie's commitment to research performance and student engagement.

The intention is to encourage research that contributes directly to strategy development, community capacity building, urban planning, place making, workforce planning, leadership development, environmental sustainability and the utilisation of technologies to enhance citizen engagement and customer service. The University's recent curriculum developments require all students to include 'Participation and Community Engagement' in their studies, and this has opened exciting opportunities to develop longitudinal research that engages students in data collection and analysis with capacity for high resolution local studies across a range of fields. The role of the Macquarie Park precinct in the global economic corridor identified in the Sydney Metro Strategy has also emerged as a driver of research collaboration, as has a global vision for drawing research capacity into long term service of both the wider local community and the local government's strategic priorities.

This paper explores the challenges and opportunities that emerge from developing this agreement and identifies the possibility of benefits to local communities as a result.

## Introduction

*Historically, partnerships between universities and community organizations have been either non-existent or unconstructive; this state of affairs being the result of opposing philosophies and practices (Martin et al., 2005: p1).*

The relationships universities have with their local host communities has often been seen as a problem to be solved (Pickford, 1989). This has changed rapidly in recent years, as universities have reflected critically on issues involved in partnering with schools (Butcher et al., 2011), government agencies (Fisher et al., 2005), commercial interests (Cannella and Miller, 2008), not-for-profit organisations (Billett et al., 2007), community groups and others (Johnson Butterfield and Soska, 2005; Kearney and Candy, 2005; Buys and Bursnall, 2007). It is increasingly recognised that local-scale partnerships can contribute positively to developing transformative foundations for excellence in both universities and local institutions. Neo-liberal reforms in public administration generally and universities in particular, however, have also seen partnerships emerge as means of transforming citizen-government relations (see eg. Lowndes and Sullivan, 2004) and has placed pressure on universities to respond to new agendas from governments (Dowling, 2008). In university-community partnerships, the local scope of research activities is easily downplayed and undervalued in an academic climate that privileges global profiling over local service (Rogge and Rocha, 2005). And in local government circles, the fit between council responsibilities and broader agendas involved in links with universities has often been ambiguous at best (Lowndes and Sullivan, 2004; Moxley, 2005).

In December 2011, Macquarie University and the City of Ryde execute a Memorandum of Understanding that is intended to frame and facilitate a twenty year research partnership that will transform the 'town-and-gown' relationship in Sydney's inner north. While there are many exemplars of university-community partnerships targeting development and circulation of ideas, fostering applied and value-adding research, transferring knowledge and advancing engagement, inclusion and quality (Butcher et al., 2011), several elements of the partnership emerging between Macquarie and Ryde are notable. First, the integration of research, learning and teaching and community service aspirations of the university in the partnership and its moderation by senior leaders across each portfolio produces an uncommon level of integration across the university in developing the partnership. Second, the coincidence of the university's site and a major urban planning challenge associated with continuing growth in the Macquarie Park Corridor draws not only the academic mission of the university into the picture, but also its property and projects portfolio along with the planning priorities of the City. Thirdly, the City is also approaching this partnership in a spirit that is more holistic than has been common. Rather than focusing on 'commissioned research' or specific projects, the City has used ideas of place-making, capacity-building and strategic planning to conceptualise this partnership as working across its own portfolios and strategic imperatives. This suggests the partnership is in the process of "reshaping institutional boundaries" (Sandmann and Weerts, 2008). And in the process, it promises to transform the experience of students, researchers, administrators, planners, staff and community members.

The intention is to encourage research that contributes directly to development and implementation of strategy in both institutions and fosters community capacity building, better urban planning, place making, workforce planning, leadership development, environmental sustainability and the utilisation of technologies to enhance citizen engagement and customer service. This will be pursued in the context of specific institutional strategies in which traditional antipathies between town and gown are replaced by common commitment to sustainability,

community and excellence and shift the way the university is situated in its local host community as the foundation from which it extends to the global horizons framed by its vision to become an internationally significant research university.

In particular, the City of Ryde's new strategic vision as a 'city of lifestyle and opportunity' (City of Ryde, 2011) addresses the demands of rapid growth in the Macquarie Park Corridor, alongside new approaches to community engagement, participation in local governance and community life. The City of Ryde embraces its role as a local place-maker, promoting 'sustainable living, communities that support each other and celebrat[ing] cultural diversity, and optimis[ing] opportunities to share the benefits of a strong local economy with the needs of our residents, investors, students and workers' (City of Ryde, 2011: p3).

Macquarie University has an ambitious mission, encapsulated in the Vice-Chancellor's *Macquarie@50* statement, which recognises that 'to become a research leader, we will also have to excel in teaching' (Schwartz, 2006: p2). This has seen significant expansion of the University's research capacity in key areas of health, technology, applied science, environmental management and social inclusion in recent years, and the development of the Participation and Community Engagement program (PACE), which aims (inter alia) 'to transform the learning, teaching and research experience at Macquarie to enable enhanced contributions to a socially inclusive and sustainable society' (<http://www.pace.mq.edu.au/index.html>).

The Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership will develop relationships and activities that contribute to the mission and visions of both institutions, and will create new knowledge, capacity and opportunity within the region, and with wider significance and recognition.

## Vision

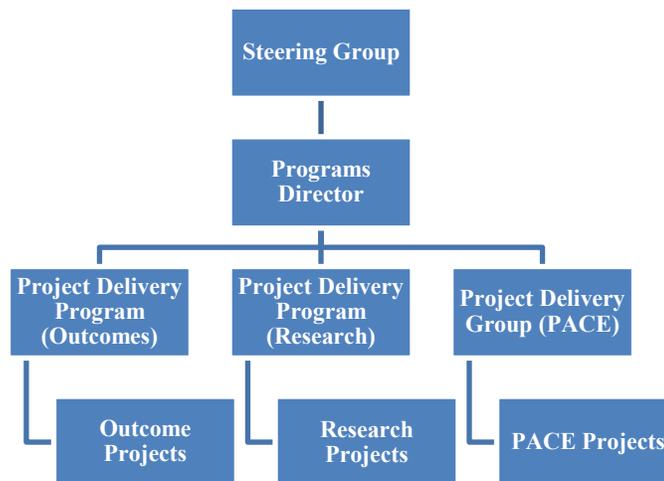
The partners aim to bring together complementary strengths of an innovative local government authority and a global research university for mutual benefit and to expand contributions to the local and regional community. The partnership will harness the research, planning and development capacities of the University as a strategic asset for the City's pursuit of its Community Strategic Plan. The vision for a strong and diverse partnership encompasses:

- Research, including identified short-term projects, student research projects, external and collaboratively funded projects, regular and longitudinal data collection, analysis, evaluation as well as development of broader open-ended and long term research agendas.
- Planning, including institutional engagement around issues of strategic planning, place management, site development, community impacts, use of technology, leadership/workforce development and sustainability.
- Development, including workforce planning, community engagement programs and student-based engagement in City of Ryde programs and projects across the curriculum through PACE.
- Funding commitments from each partner, as support for publication of outcomes.

In its initial form, the partnership target a vibrant research partnership for the period 2012-2032, which we anticipate will include development of a high-profile public think tank with recognition as a vehicle for innovative urban, community, technology and related research.

## Vehicles

Governance of the partnership will be delivered through a steering group consisting of senior officers of the City of Ryde and the University, who will meet 3-4 times annually to secure high level buy-in to the project. A senior academic with strong reputation in research, teaching and community service (Howitt) will take on the role of full-time director with responsibility to secure and support strong mid-level buy-in to the project from academics and staff and the university and to liaise with mid-level managers at the City of Ryde. Program delivery and evaluation will be overseen through smaller focused working groups in research, participation and outcome areas. An initial review of the partnership will be undertaken during its first 12 months with a view to confirming commitments and governance arrangements.



**Figure 1: Proposed structure of the Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership**

Several key areas will support the partnership. These program areas will target sustainable resources, coherent reporting and delivery of outcomes across the partnership:

- **Research activity** – internally funded projects.
- **Research funding**– opportunities for external funding of major research projects.
- **Community learning partnerships**– development of PACE-based partnerships.
- **Student placements and internships** – Macquarie University students undertaking voluntary placements at City of Ryde that contribute to their coursework across the full range of City of Ryde service areas.
- **Research development**– collaboration on HDR projects (including Council staff undertaking higher degree projects).
- **Research partnerships**– partnership projects with third parties.
- **Research mentors**– development of an active research mentoring network.
- **Research publication**– rapid web-based publication of working papers and support for successful peer reviewed publications and production of partnership reports for Council and community audiences.

## Challenges

Ryde is easily caricatured as ‘middle Australia’. On many indicators, the ‘average Ryde’ is very similar to ‘average Sydney’. Yet the City of Ryde encompasses great diversity with 37.7% of its population born overseas (significantly higher than the metropolitan average of 31.8%). Moreover, immigration policy has changed the ethnic mix of Ryde. The 50’s and 60’s witnessed a strong growth in Italian

settlement whilst later growth in Chinese, Korean and Indian settlement is changing the demographics of the place. What impact has this made? How should a city respond and adapt to this diversity?

Similarly, the University's local footprint is characterised by its diverse student population as much as its facilities and services. This places pressure on local accommodation in the areas surrounding the university and has created local community tensions in attitudes towards boarding houses which didn't exist 10 years ago (NSW Parliament - Social Policy Committee, 2011).

Changes in the diversity mix of a population are only one of the many challenges that a long term strategic plan for a place must address. How does a local authority ensure that the changing aspirations of its community stay on track? Are its stated goals and strategies really delivering those things that its changing population require? Does community perception of their place change over time? If so what has caused it for better or for worse? The challenge of understanding such issues is at the core of the Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership. It has led to a rare longitudinal commitment to explore these questions and learn from them so that our local strategies adapt and remain relevant over time.

The fanfare accompanying the public launch of such a partnership lasts only briefly, and the value of the partnership will be derived not from passing pageantry but from consolidation of working relationships across a wide range of disciplinary and inter-disciplinary research areas of the university and the portfolios of the council, along with expanding depth in links that evolve over time from student-based activities in the PACE program, the value and esteem that is given to research output from the projects undertaken within the partnership, and the community recognition of the contributions made by the partnership. While good marketing and branding can do much to secure such recognition, it is likely to be only fleeting without substantive achievement and relationships to back it up.

Effective University-Community partnerships are neither straightforward nor simple. Martin et al identify success as dependent on several key factors: funding, communication, synergy, measurable outcomes, visibility and dissemination of findings, organizational compatibility, and simplicity (Martin et al., 2005). In framing the partnership around broad research capacity rather than specific research interests in urban or related matters, Macquarie University and the City of Ryde see significant opportunities achievements across that range of factors quite quickly. Significant challenges to success for this project, however, can also be identified:

- shifting from in-principle agreement at senior levels to strong institutional buy-in at middle management level
- maintaining coherence between diverse individual projects and activities and the institutional strategies of the University and the City
- delivering recognisable and sustainable benefits to community and third party partners
- growing capacity and opportunity rather than fighting over inadequate existing resources for this work
- integrating the partnership into existing systems and practices in both institutions.
- utilising project management methodologies which enable resource demands and projects to be delivered on time
- gaining an understanding of how each institution works so that expectations are managed
- ensuring that adequate resources are provided from each body
- developing a governance framework which is robust and enduring

## Opportunities

Alongside these challenges are the opportunities that have enlivened conversations between the parties in recent months. The added value of the different perspectives brought to the table, and the development of common language, recognition of shared values and aspirations, and patience and tolerance to allow for the recognition and exploration of difference and divergence, have excited many of the discussions around the MOU and specific projects over recent months.

Priority areas for the City of Ryde include

- development of Community of Interest Network capacity, which has seen discussions with researchers in computing, GIS, marketing and social research (with varying outcomes),
- independently tracking community perception of progress against the City of Ryde Community Strategic Plan so that its strategies remain relevant
- workforce planning, with discussions in human resources and higher degree research
- environmental issues around waste and transport planning, with discussions in environmental science, chemistry, physics and geography
- student placements and service opportunities in community youth drama programs, homework centres and related areas
- consideration of social impact studies around elements of place management, student accommodation, and the University's concept plan
- discussion of larger research collaborations around development of the Macquarie Park Corridor.

For the University, there are many positives. The rich opportunities for research on the university's doorstep with its diverse host communities and local businesses and agencies has long been recognised, reflected in the university's early commitment to developing a research park on its site (commencing in 1998). Linking research to student opportunities in placements, internships and research-led teaching each goes to the core of the university's vision of excellence, and will build reputational value through improved student experience, improved staff retention and satisfaction and improved graduate employment outcomes.

For many researchers, the prospect of developing intensive and long-term research relationships and programs on the university's doorstep offers significant career advantages and we anticipate nurturing a number of early career researchers to develop such programs in the local area and to secure external funding to build strong local research programs in a range of discipline areas. In particular, the opportunity to have a 'living workshop' in which to explore and refine the policy relevance of research with an engaged and willing set of partners is a compelling driver for research.

## Conclusion

Macquarie University's greenfield site in Sydney's inner north in the 1960s permitted development of a major institution with minimal links to its local host community. In the current era, with the development of the Macquarie Park Corridor, internal developments within the university site, changes in both the host and University communities have created pressures to reconsider the University's local roles. The development of a research-focused partnership that encompasses a range of issues from specific research projects to student engagement, community service and internal management programs in council is valued by both partners, and will contribute positively to all stakeholders.

With both partners committed to developing a strong and sustainable partnership over the next 20 years, willingness to tackle key challenges and to make the most of key opportunities will rely on extending the network of collaboration into middle management and the planning of academic programs and careers, as well as securing adequate resources to support and implement the shared vision of the partners.

The University's PACE program offers an exceptional opportunity to mobilize both staff and student resources to this task. The demands and opportunities of continuing growth and innovation in the Macquarie Park Corridor represents a significant driver for making a long term relationship work, as do a range of local social, community and planning issues. And the City of Ryde's own community strategic plan creates drivers for quality research and long-term analysis. This combination of factors supports considerable optimism between the partners for a constructive time in building the Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership.

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